

## Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

# Prologue

By Dr. Donald F. Smith

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Veterinarians and animal lovers everywhere are interested in what is happening in the veterinary profession. What better time to suggest perspectives on the future than during this year, our 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary.<sup>1</sup>

Anticipating the future is no easy task, but understanding events that have shaped our profession is a critical first step. We were initially a city profession embedded in the population centers of the country and with ties to human medicine. Though there was a handful of colleges in rural America at land grant institutions, the majority of U.S. veterinarians received their education from urban proprietary (for profit) schools or from colleges affiliated with medical schools in cities like New York, Chicago and Boston. Most graduates practiced equine medicine in large cities.

With the development of the internal combustion engine in the early 1900s, the need for equine veterinarians fell precipitously. All but two of the urban veterinary colleges closed and veterinary medicine became aligned with agriculture and rural America.<sup>2</sup> Only one additional veterinary college was established in a major city in the cluster of colleges that emerged in the post World War II period,<sup>3</sup> and we remained largely a country profession until the 1960s when companion animal practices started to flourish and clinical specialties emerged.

The new veterinary colleges that were established in the 1970s were part of the land grant educational system, promoted by the agricultural lobby in their respective states.<sup>4</sup> Enrollment of women students increased greatly in the late 1970s and soon became the majority of graduating veterinarians.

As we enter our 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary year, our nation's veterinarians have an impressive array of critical professional responsibilities in the private, public, corporate and non profit sectors. However, veterinarians are still largely educated in land grant universities away from the most populous centers of the country where we most commonly work. Despite our critical role in human health, publicly-supported colleges receive their funding from the agricultural sector, rather than from state departments of health.

During the past five years and coincident with the downturn in the economy, practicing veterinarians have worried about an overabundance of new graduates entering a constricting market as colleges expand class size and many new veterinarians come from outside the United

States. Veterinary students are concerned about repaying an educational debt that seems to be out of sync with compensation.

If it takes challenging times to consider the future, these are the times.

Seizing the opportunity of our anniversary year, the stories provided in *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine* will carry the reader from our beginnings in New York City in 1863 to our future in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The focus of *Perspectives* will not be so much on dates and events and important people as on stories of what makes the profession veritable and vibrant, and gives us confidence that our best days lie ahead if we adapt to meet the challenges of the times.

These stories will promote three critical themes, and we shall return to them over and over again from the perspective of our past and our future. One theme submits that we must rid ourselves of the grip of the land grant culture that has narrowed our focus and limited our advancement for at least half a century. The need for women's leadership in the profession is another recurring theme, and the role of veterinarians in promoting human health is the third.

I invite you to join me as we examine the direction of veterinary medicine through the lens of history. Be prepared to share your views even as I share mine, and let us boldly embrace the future of our chosen profession.

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<sup>1</sup> The United States Veterinary Medical Association was formed in 1863 when a group of 40 east coast veterinarians met at the Astor House in New York City. The name was changed to American Veterinary Medical Association in 1898.

<sup>2</sup> The exceptions were the veterinary colleges at the University of Pennsylvania and The Ohio State University.

<sup>3</sup> At the University of Minnesota, in 1947.

<sup>4</sup> The only one of the nine new colleges established in the 1970s and early 1980s that was not at a land grant campus is the Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University.

#### KEYWORDS:

History of Veterinary Medicine  
AVMA  
American Veterinary Medicine Association  
Women in Veterinary Medicine  
Land Grant University  
One Health  
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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

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Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

*Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine* is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.